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ABSTRACT

Descriptions are given of four Australian programs intended to improve relations between primary and secondary school personnel and surrounding multiethnic communities. Presented in the form of four case studies, a variety of community-school issues are considered. In particular, the need for sensitive and well-trained counselors to serve as liaison personnel between parents and schools is emphasized. Programs examined include communication improvement techniques instituted at two primary schools, the social and economic issues involved in the operation of a school-generated community center, and the language and cultural difficulties of providing counsel leading to self-help for a Queensland aboriginal community. (LH)

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Home-School Liaison and Minority Groups

Four Case Studies from the School and Community Project

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INTRODUCTION

This is a further collection of case studies from Burwood State College which have 'home-school liaison' as a common theme. These four studies feature schools which have significant minority groups in their client populations, and are usually staffed by Australian-trained and centrally appointed teachers. The school's curriculum will then be influenced by the training and experience of those teachers, as well as by a central educational body.

However, in each of these cases the school or a number of its representatives have made a decision to narrow this obvious gap between minority and majority group perception and feelings about education. They embarked on an intensive program of contact with families in an attempt to interpret the aims of the school program to a minority group often alienated from the school and, in turn, interpret to the school the needs and anxieties of the families from which the students come. In some cases the aid of a local person with ties to both cultural groups has been enlisted.

Regardless of their background, the focus must be on this linking person who has to balance the delicate issues of school-based community development. It is becoming obvious that for such goals to be achieved liaison personnel need to take care to understand, interpret and communicate to all staff the benefits of the programs for the classroom teacher.

These case studies represent specific techniques applied to particular school communities. Care needs to be taken when generalising such techniques to all those communities where the initiative to involve the community comes from the school. Given the present climate of encouraging decision-making by the whole school community, every locality needs to be seen as unique and the same level of sensitivity applied to the needs and frustrations of parent, teacher and student groups, as to these documented minority groups.

Rosemary Hooke
Senior Research Officer

August 1978

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Narrabundah Primary School

A SCHOOL THAT RELATES TO ITS COMMUNITY

BY: HUGH WATSON

SUMMARY

How do schools adapt to cater for the differences in the clientele of the community?

Narrabundah Primary School in Canberra has initiated several programs over a number of years to bring the school and the community it serves closer together.

The key factors in this development have been:

- . The stabilising of staff and the ability of the principal and teachers to work harmoniously.
- . The introduction of comprehensive ESL (English as a Second Language) program throughout the school.
- . The encouragements of parents, and especially mothers, to come into the school regularly.
- . The development of a school curriculum (including Special Education) to cater for the needs of all the children.

The desire to cater for children by extending the schooling facilities into the community.

INTRODUCTION

We were told Narrabundah Primary School was shocking when we first moved here. We very nearly ended up sending the kids to another school. Gosh, I'm glad we didn't listen.

Narrabundah is the best school the kids have been to. The teachers are kind and seem to understand ... especially the kids who have moved around a lot ... there's no singling kids out. The other kids in the school seem to copy from the teachers and my kids feel accepted and good about school for the first time. I just wish other schools with residential caravan parks would take note.

This comment, made by a mother of three children, highlights the attitude of Narrabundah Primary School in its attempt to cater for the needs of all the

children who come to the school.

Narrabundah serves an area of Canberra that is very different from the average Australian's view of our national capital. It draws its fluctuating population of 300 - 400 pupils from three main sources; suburban Narrabundah, the Causeway, and the caravan parks.

Suburban Narrabundah is a mixture of standard government brick veneer houses and detached fibro cottages which are used as emergency housing. The Causeway, which is at present undergoing redevelopment, was long regarded as the last resort for those seeking government housing. Over 100 wooden cottages, some more than 50 years old, housed a number of old time residents as well as families forced there through economic or social circumstances.

The two local caravan parks contribute greatly to the fluctuating population of Narrabundah Primary School. These are mainly long-stay camps whose occupants include the genuinely poor and the migratory who travel north in the winter. It is estimated that in four out of five families in the caravan parks, the breadwinner is unemployed.

In all, the school is characterised by transience, low socio-economic status, and high migrancy (40 per cent of pupils do not speak English as a mother tongue). The resultant problems for the school are many but the school has adapted itself to its clientele.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

The development of programs for a diverse population

is not a new phenomenon at Narrabundah Primary School. The school secretary, Mrs Monday, who has been at the school since 1969, has seen an evolvement with different principals.

- . Alan Bennett, the principal in 1969, worked with the president of the P & C, Ann Platt, to bring mothers into the school.
- . Keith Crawley, the principal in 1972, ran father and son nights and also chicken nights at the local hotel with the fathers to raise funds. During this time the school developed strong ties with Social Welfare and emphasised counselling.
- . Gary Donnelly in 1974 introduced the novel idea of foster grandmothers to hear the children read. The ladies came from the nearby Salvation Army retirement village and were willing to listen to the children and talk to them. Some of the children had previously not known what grandparents were.
- . The present principal, John Hamilton, arrived in 1975 and set about improving the standing of the school board, and attempted to bring education to the children by seeking to open an annexe in the Causeway for school refusers.

Whilst the teachers have tried to cater for the children within the school they have been aware that they have not reached all those who should be receiving some type of education.

It was with this in mind that John Hamilton sought to establish the annexe in the Causeway in 1976 to cater for the school refusers who numbered over 20 in that

area alone.

A voluntary drop-in centre had already been established in the Causeway by several young people interested in helping the children of the area. As one of these voluntary workers was a qualified teacher Hamilton sought to have him attached to Narrabundah Primary School but working fulltime out of the house in which he was living in the Causeway.

It was envisaged that the annexe would run programs to help the kids aged 5 - 20 cope with basic literacy and numeracy and encourage them to return to the normal school system or find jobs.

The scheme was hindered by various government departments with the result that it was unable to get off the ground on a permanent basis. The drop-in centre continued until closed down for the Causeway redevelopment and the teacher joined the staff of the school to take the Special Education Class.

The school board is still keen to establish an annexe in the Narrabundah area as they are all too aware that many children are not coming to school. They believe it is their role to cater for all the children in the area.

Lois Parker, who is doing research work into caravan parks on a Schools Commission grant, believes that teachers could go to the caravan parks to talk to parents and children or even to run classes. She has found that Narrabundah is one of the few schools that seeks to help the children of itinerant workers because it makes them feel accepted and good about themselves.

One mother said to her:

I wish to Christ we knew when and where we were going. Schooling is the biggest problem but there are other niggly problems such as discrimination. Narrabundah is terrific and I'm really going to miss it when we go, but I've had some awful knock-backs in other places.

The school has established strong relationships with various welfare agencies in Canberra. This has helped when teachers find that particular children are not coping well at school. The community nurse frequently visits the homes of those children who seem to have a poor standard of hygiene or are suffering family problems. She works with the school counsellor who not only tests children for specific learning difficulties but also helps them with personal problems. The teachers are advised of any change in home circumstances.

Perhaps the greatest success in linking the school and the community has been the 'Conversation Corner' set up by the assistant principal, Narelle Hargreaves, in 1976. At the fortnightly meetings, often numbering up to 40 mothers, there are guest speakers on health, hygiene, and education. The children sometimes present plays or some of their work, and the mothers have the opportunity to discuss common desires and problems over an informal afternoon tea. The community nurse and the counsellor often attend the meetings.

Narelle Hargreaves is, in fact, one of the cornerstones of the school. A tireless worker, she is ever ready to assist teachers in their duties, meet parents or guests and generally help maintain a happy atmosphere of co-operation with the school.

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

The curriculum program developed within the school reflects the efforts of the principal and staff to cater for the diverse needs of the children. They are aware that their children are 'different' and require different approaches to other Canberra schools. It is in their attempts to adapt the school curriculum to community needs that the staff have developed some novel and successful programs.

An intensive ESL program has been established at the school with four fulltime teachers working on an integrated basis. The co-ordinator of the program, Rhonda Faenza, was previously employed by the Pre-school Authority for two years on ESL mother and child group teaching, using the school as a base. She came into the school as a fulltime teacher in 1975 to follow through the children who were coming to primary school.

In May 1976 an Adult Migrant Education Centre was established in Narrabundah. The centre holds classes between 10.00 am and 12.00 noon each weekday for 50 adult students. The school has played an important role as the most effective advertiser of community affairs in this case, as the children were asked to inform their parents about the centre. As a result the ties between the school and the migrant community have grown stronger.

Two Special Education classes operate in the school, a Junior Assessment Class (JAC) for children aged 5 - 8, and a Senior Assessment Class (SAC) for children aged 8 - 12. The classes are designed to cater for children with social, emotional, behavioural, and learning problems who have difficulty fitting into the normal classroom. The philosophy behind the Special Education

program is that the children be given the opportunity to work and advance in a small group (8 - 12) in order that they might eventually rejoin the normal classes. In addition, there is a fulltime remedial reading teacher who has a well-equipped reading resources room which operates on a withdrawal basis.

John Hamilton was very much opposed to the traditional OA (slow learner) classes and they were scrapped in 1975. In October of that year the Junior Assessment Class began. There were problems as many still regarded the classes as a depositing ground for children with low IQ's or behavioural problems. Again, in 1977, when the Senior Assessment Class began there was a disproportionate number of problem children in the class with the result that there was no advantage to children who were placed in the class. However, staff attitudes are changing and the classes are now being regarded as an integral part of the school.

Given the number of children from broken and one parent families, there could be many more Special Education classes established at Narrabundah Primary School. However, the caring attitude of the teachers in the school as a whole helps this situation.

Of special concern for the school has been the PE program which includes a remedial section for children with poor gross motor skills. A trained YMCA instructor works with the fulltime PE teacher to develop the children's co-ordination and confidence. This has paid dividends for the classroom teachers as the improvement in gross motor skills is a necessary prerequisite for improving fine motor skills such as writing.

John Hamilton has often remarked on what he regards as

the very 'professional' attitude his staff have towards the school and the children. There are weekly staff meetings and these have divided into smaller working groups to revise, update and, if necessary, overhaul various part of the curriculum. Areas for concern in 1977 were maths, language, health education, special education, and school policy.

The staff as a whole decided on an integrated theme of 'Flight' in third term 1977 and this allowed the common use of materials and the feeling of joint effort from kindergarten to sixth class culminating in a 'Flight Concert'. Similar integrated programs are planned for 1978.

STRUCTURES

The principal fosters a 'collegiate'-type management in which there is a high tolerance for experimentation and readjustment of working relationships to help meet the needs of students. The staff generally responds to this initiative through individual initiative in their classrooms. However, all major curriculum decisions are made by the whole staff and Hamilton is intolerant of 'mavericks' who seek to go beyond the norms established by the school and the community.

The ACT Schools Authority allows each school a great deal of autonomy in the running of the school. The school board has a budget which allows it to purchase educational materials to suit its curriculum. The curriculum developed is 'school-based' allowing schools such as Narrabundah to adapt to the needs of the community rather than the directives of a central body.

Similarly, the Schools Authority appoints a counsellor

who covers several schools to provide pastoral care and assistance to teachers. The Authority is responsive to the need for special education classes and attempts to provide trained teachers for such classes. Other structures are important, too, in helping the school meet the needs of its students. The YMCA have a hall near the school grounds which runs activities during the after school hours. The nearby Kingston Welfare Agency has contact with many of the families in the area and is able to provide information on family breakups and delinquency problems - valuable information for the teachers. The community nurse, already mentioned, is one of the few official people accepted into the homes of the Narrabundah families.

SOME OPINIONS

A boy who was new to the school in 1977 and had been to six schools in the last nine years found Narrabundah a friendly place from the first day. He had not always been to school in previous towns where his family had lived because he helped with fruit picking. He consequently had difficulty with reading and language work. He said that the teachers had welcomed him, had attempted to find out his strengths and weaknesses and had offered help in the first few days. Of the headmaster he says, "He's a lot more better 'cos he takes care of kids more than in other schools". The boy was impressed with the number of sporting and other trips organised by the teachers, the non-use of the cane and the friendliness of the other students. His father thought it the best school his son had attended and had in fact met other parents through him.

A teacher who had previously been at two other schools

expected Narrabundah to be a 'rough' school. His expectations about the children have been confirmed: "they need that extra love, attention, sensitivity and understanding and, given this, many respond markedly". He does not consider the school rough and sees the strength of the school in the maturity, interests, and professionalism of the staff:

Staff interaction is great - a casualness exists which reflects the feeling we are trying to give the kids, that the school is not an authoritarian, regimented institution which is just the kind of thing these particular children would rebel against most of all.

NARRABUNDAH PRIMARY SCHOOL - PRESENT AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Narrabundah Primary School is an open school. The staff encourages parents and other members of the community to visit the classrooms and attend school functions. There are also many visitors from interstate sent by the ACT Schools Authority. The school has a close liaison with the Canberra College of Advanced Education, taking student teachers and allowing research students to collect data.

The openness of the staff is reflected in the children who seem to enjoy the school and all it has to offer. There is the feeling that more can be done if present policies continue.

However, like other school and community projects, the continued progress depends on specific people. Were John Hamilton to leave (and there is talk of

this with falling numbers in the school due to the economic recession in Canberra) then the direction from the top which encourages teachers to innovate and be outgoing could be lost. Similarly, the work done by Narelle Hargreaves as deputy is essential to a school that believes in friendliness and co-operation.

Yet one has the feeling that any new principal coming to the school would fall in with a staff intent upon pursuing their policy towards the children and the community. One would also hope that with growing community participation, the parents would object if changes were made to the education system which they can see is of benefit to their children.

At present the staff turnover is low, and morale is high. Therefore Narrabundah should continue progressing in its difficult task of adjusting school programs to the varied needs of its community.

In 1977 one of the focal points in generating a school and community spirit was the 'Narrabundah Band', a rock group of seven Narrabundah Primary School children and one teacher who played often at the school and visited other schools in Canberra to give concerts. Their song and that taken up by all the children in the school begins:

We are the kids of Narrabundah
We come from everywhere
Now doesn't it make you wonder?

□□□□□□

St. Brigid's Primary School

PROJECT TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MIGRANT PARENTS AND THE SCHOOL

BY: DAVID BAMBACH

1. SUMMARY

St Brigid's School, a systemic Catholic primary school in Midland (in the eastern sector of Perth) received a Schools Commission Innovations Program grant in 1975 to enable it to appoint a home-school liaison officer. The specific task of the tri-lingual person appointed was to promote communication and understanding between the school and the high proportion of migrant families (largely Italian) in the area. The programme was designed to familiarize migrant families with the school's purposes, procedures, and curriculum, and with the educational needs of the children. It was hoped that greater interest and involvement by parents in the life of the school and a closer interaction between school and community would result.

2. AIMS AND FOCUS OF PROJECT

Sister Maria Rosa, the principal of St Brigid's School, expressed the 'immediate and long-term objectives' for the project in her 1974 submission

to the Schools Commission:

- (i) to build up understanding and complementarity between the migrant families and the school, and
- (ii) the marked improvement in children's educational standards, greater interest and involvement on the part of parents; a more integrated school and community in this area.

The school had become acutely aware of the inability of migrant parents to understand a different educational system, to assist their children with homework, to provide educational experiences at home for them, to be enthusiastic about educational possibilities or school activities and functions. The consequences for migrant children included an often marked indifference towards school and a generally lower level of ability and interest in written work and reading.

The focus of the project, then, has been on tackling these problems, with the liaison officer as the key figure in a programme which involved both a

'reaching out' and a 'bringing in' - the school in the community, and the community in the school - and also a fostering of the concept of school and home as being in educational partnership.

3. SOURCES OF INITIATIVE AND SUPPORT AND MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY

The vision, enthusiasm, initiative and energy so necessary for such a project to succeed have undoubtedly come largely from Sister Maria Rosa. She not only clearly and accurately perceived the need for more effective communication between migrant parents and the school and for fuller involvement by parents, but also conceived positive, practical objectives and a programme which would enable that need to be met. She has assumed major responsibility for the project but has received good support from her staff and from the Catholic Education Commission, as well as an adequate grant from the Schools Commission Innovations Program.

The appointee has been of crucial importance in the success of the scheme from its beginning. The liaison officer is Miss Maria Stefanelli whose family is well known and respected in the local Italian community of Midland. She speaks the Italian dialect of Southern Italy that so many St Brigid's parents come from, English, and also Yugoslav.

The grant, originally made for two years, was extended to the end of 1977. The programme is considered so important by the school and the School Board that it is being continued in 1978 through a joint effort of the Disadvantaged Schools Project and the budgeting of the Board.

4. PROGRAMME FOR INTERACTION BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

The Home-School Liaison Officer

Maria Stefanelli spends the greater part of the day at the school and does most of her home visiting in the evening. She seeks to provide parents with a fuller understanding of what is happening at the school and of their children who are brought up between two often conflicting cultures. Maria is admirably fitted for her tasks at St Brigid's. She explains the reasons for her obvious appreciation and knowledge of the local community and the school in this way:

I know all the parents and who they are related to in the area ... I am part of this community myself. I was brought up in Midland. I came out to live in Midland when I was five, and I attended St Brigid's School so I really feel at home here. I coach net-ball teams in the area. I belong to the Italian Club. When I was a child I lived next door to a Yugoslav family and played with a Yugoslav girl so I also quickly picked up the Yugoslav language (which was close to our dialect).

Communication is the basis of the process of developing parental and wider community involvement and participation in school life, and communication is Maria's forte. Her tasks in the programme of Interaction include: translation and interpretation, welcoming new families to the school community, explaining the school to the community (and the community to the school), home visits, informal meetings with parents, liaising between parents and teachers, contributing ideas on home-school

relationships, organising parental participation in a variety of activities at the school, and being present at all major parent-teacher meetings and major school functions. She brings to her work a natural propensity for relating easily with people, a genuine interest in children and, because of her background, a sensitive appreciation of the attitudes and values of the migrant families.

The liaison officer's first programme of home visits three years ago was very extensive, and was critical for the success of the project. The principal explains that

through these visits parents came to know and trust Maria. She empathised with them, and yet could explain the school's stand on many things. Following this there took place a number of home meetings also involving teachers and host families. These, though exacting on the personnel involved, were quite fruitful for parents were enabled to see that participation in their children's school work was not beyond them. Social studies, spelling, and phonics were the subjects of these meetings and all who participated found them very beneficial.

Preparation of Pre-School Children

An important contribution by Maria has been the visits she makes to the pre-school children (and their parents) the year before they are due to start at St Brigid's. Parents (particularly migrant parents unfamiliar with education in this country) seem to have appreciated the help in preparing their children for school. Activities include cutting out, pasting,

colouring in and assembling, and others designed to develop one-to-one correspondence. Parents are encouraged to join in, to read stories and to borrow picture books from the liaison officer's stock. When future Year 1 children and their parents are invited to the school later in the year before the children start, they are familiar with at least one person in the school scene and understand something of the school's purposes and activities. They are less likely, therefore, to feel threatened and more inclined to fit in readily at the school.

Encouragement of Parental Participation in School Activities

Of 165 families in the school in 1974, 141 were migrant families, including 110 non-English speaking, 72 of which did not speak any English in the home. This created several problems for the school, one of which was, as the principal observes, that

the parents did not come near the school; they kept well away, partly through the problem of not being able to communicate, partly through a fear of the school setup. So we set to work to find a way of breaking down the barriers, and bringing them into the school, something they hadn't done before.

Maria sees herself as "a link between people - parents, teachers, children, and other community members" and explains part of the dilemma for parents (the Italian parents in particular) in this way:

When they went to school in their country they had almost exclusively reading, writing, and arithmetic. They cannot understand why

children are doing arts and crafts and going on excursions and camps, which all seem to be wasting time. It takes a while to understand the more diverse and balanced programme of schools today in this country.

Parallel to the school's ongoing explanations to families about the school's purposes, procedures and curriculum, has been a concerted attempt through visits, informal meetings, and the weekly newsletter to encourage parents to participate in various ways in the life of the school. Parental involvement, the school has realised, usually brings more positive informed attitudes and greater support for what the school is attempting to do for children.

5. STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

Sister Maria Rosa has had complete autonomy in the organisation of the home-school liaison project and has received every encouragement from the Catholic Education Commission. The State Education Department, in particular Dr C. Goodridge (the Department's officer with special responsibility for fostering community involvement in schools) has shown a deep interest. Mr A. Ducker from the Schools Commission office has been a frequent visitor and has made a videotape in connection with the programme.

Two years ago the whole staff, including the liaison officer, participated in a two and a half day live-in seminar to facilitate the drawing up of a revised school policy statement. Later, the liaison officer held parent meetings - class by class - to discuss the draft document produced. Parents were invited to

comment and to make recommendations. Many of the comments were clearly assurances of support, while recommendations included some relating to the school canteen. The principal acted on these recommendations, and a complete change in the canteen's administration commenced in 1977.

Encouragement of community participation in school decision making, and of an understanding of policy and goals, is a developing feature of St Brigid's School. The liaison officer is currently drawing up a document containing the most relevant and interesting parts of the school policy, and this will be translated by her and then circulated in both Italian and English.

6. SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAMME

The success of the programme to promote communication, in particular through the appointment of the liaison officer, can be gauged in many ways. For example, the breaking down of misunderstanding and reticence is well illustrated by a dramatic change in attitude towards a school camp in Kalgoorlie during the first year of the programme. The principal reflects:

We tried very hard to break down the reticence of the parents with regard to the children going on excursions and camps, and to build up their appreciation of what these activities can do for the children. They could not understand that such things were not holidays. I wanted to take the girls to Kalgoorlie, a place where they would not normally go, and with the help of the liaison officer we were eventually able to get 100 per cent permission for the girls to live

away for nine days. It was very difficult work because in some cases there were two or three discussion sessions with the parents. Finally, it was the fact that the liaison officer was going with us that was the reason why they permitted their daughters to go.

One of the parents who was involved, and who remembers well the difficulties prior to the camp, recalls that Maria Stefanelli's influence 'turned the tide':

Italian parents are very strict in regard to where their children go and what they do. Maria spoke to all the parents, explained the educational and social advantages of the camp, and put their minds at rest, and even promised to phone them from Kalgoorlie.

A major factor contributing to the success of the programme has been the fact that Miss Stefanelli is an active member of the community and the local Catholic church, as well as being fluent in the three principal languages spoken by parents. Through regular home visits, telephone conversations, and discussions with parents at the school, she has been able to explain the school to the community and enlist support for its work with children.

The liaison officer believes that one of the changes to have come during the past few years has been the development of a different school 'atmosphere' (e.g. in terms of relationships, particularly between parents and the school). This can be largely traced back to changes in parents' attitudes.

Generally I have been happy about the response from parents. There have been many more parents coming to the school and helping with activities such as reading and playground duties. But, also, the atmosphere in the school is very different - more friendly and co-operative.

The principal and teachers have done much to develop closer relationships but, as Sister Maria observes, they are "still relying very heavily on Maria Stefanelli when it comes to any form of interaction with migrant parents".

The principal reports that there has been close to a 100 percent attendance at the parent-teacher meetings held during each of the last three years. Parents are apparently more willing now to talk about education and are "taking more interest in what teachers are doing". As an example, the concept of vertical grouping was a new one to most parents so, before any child was put into a vertically grouped class, parents were interviewed. There was a big general meeting to introduce the idea and an evaluation meeting for parents and teachers at the end of 1977, with another 100 percent attendance. This emphasis on parent education and parent feedback has been both a feature of the programme and a significant reason for its success.

7. PROBLEMS

The main problems to emerge are those which relate to time and human limitations:

1. So much depends on the liaison officer and the principal and, because instant success is not always possible or visible, there is the

constant danger of these people feeling discouraged by an apparent lack of progress.

2. Funding for a limited period has created some tension and apprehension regarding the future of the programme.
3. The task of fostering communication readily becomes all consuming and a considerable drain on the energy and resources of the people most involved.
4. Some problems of 'over involvement' have arisen because not all volunteers are suitable and an occasional "trouble-maker decides to be involved".

Another problem which is currently being tackled is that an urgent need has arisen for a physical point in the school for parents. The liaison officer, in particular, has observed the necessity for a physical 'drop-in' centre where parents can go and feel at ease during their increasingly frequent visits to the school. Funding has not included such a centre so far.

8. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The school hopes in the near future to provide parents with a place they can 'call their own' within the school complex. This seems a logical development after three years of determined efforts to encourage parents to come to the school and be closely involved with the staff and children. Such a drop-in

centre is likely to reinforce the idea that parents belong to and are welcome at the school.

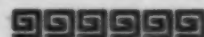
Sister Maria explains the plans in this way:

We want to turn Maria's meeting room in the school into a drop-in centre for parents when they come to the school to pick up children or at any other time. We want to build up a coffee bar, a number of articles, books of interest for parents and, perhaps, a limited toy library, in the hope that parents will come in there and talk to each other. We would like them to build up more of a community.

The intention is that Miss Stefanelli would attempt to be there when parents visit the drop-in centre, would show them and try to interest them in what is there, and would act as hostess as well as staff representative. It is hoped that the centre would contain some books in Italian as well as English, and that parents and other community members may wish to make donations to help finance it.

It seems imperative that despite funding difficulties the programme, as presently operating, should continue, at least in the immediate future. Too big a gap would be left by its cessation at this stage. Indeed a continuing and increasing role for a liaison person has clearly been created. As the principal has expressed it:

To sum up the effect of the liaison officer, I would say that she personifies for staff, children, parents, and community the school's aim to be one with the people whose school we are.



HAWKSBURN REVISITED

SETBACKS FOR A COMMUNITY CENTRE

BY: David Pettit

Towards the end of 1975 Hawksburn, a large, old, inner suburban Melbourne primary school used Schools Commission funds to buy and erect a community centre in its grounds as part of its community involvement project. When first opened the centre was co-ordinated by Anne Whyte, with assistance from other teacher aides. In 1977 the school appointed a school-community co-ordinator, Gigi Whitton, to give support to parents, develop programmes, link the school to the community, and generally develop the centre as a 'half-way house' between school and home. After operating for a year the co-ordinator was not refunded basically because little support remained in the school for the role and the work.

In 1977 the Burwood State College School and Community project had written favourably about several features of the Hawksburn project while drawing attention to possible future problems caused by the trial and error approach, divisions amongst staff and parents, the lack of professional training of the centre staff, and language difficulties with the predominantly ethnic community. While parts of the project still continue successfully, there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the problems and failures of the Hawksburn community centre's operations during 1977 which are transferrable to other schools engaged or about to engage in similar ventures.

DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS

- * Lack of clarity in aims of centre and in management structures

- * Support for centre by a minority of staff
- * Development of programmes increasingly divorced from the work of the school and not related to teacher priorities.

INITIATIVES

(1)

The centre was the brainchild of a teacher, Philia Polites; Bernie Parsons, the vice-principal; and a small number of teachers connected mainly with the infant and migrant sections of the school: they formed the majority of the proposal committee. The infant section is geographically and, in some way, operationally isolated from the upper school from which there was only limited support for the centre. Quite clearly not all teachers were convinced of the value of the centre to the school and believed they had nothing to gain from it. One teacher claimed that many teachers

... wanted no part of it. They didn't want it there; they didn't see the necessity for it.

Attempts were made by the proposal committee to explain their objectives but the principal, Phillip Clerici, believes that

... perhaps many people did not quite understand what the centre was for.

What also worked against continuity and development

was the turnover of key staff. The people most keenly pushing for the centre had all left the school by the end of 1977 and their ideas were left to others to implement. With the original idea coming from such a small number of people and the indifference or opposition of the majority of teachers, it is hardly surprising that new staff entering the school did not become fully aware of the purpose of the centre.

(ii)

Before Gigi was appointed as co-ordinator most of the work at the centre had been promoted by Anne Whyte who was a vivacious, compelling and sometimes overwhelmingly enthusiastic person. Many of the programmes at the centre were the product of her drive and skill in unearthing resources. Her energy, her pre-eminence in the centre and capacity for work often overwhelmed people. A mother recounts:

Anne had a way of putting things to you so you couldn't refuse to do it ... She was good with us; she helped us get people and do things but you (felt) obligated - you had to do it. She said to me 'Would you like to come up and show the mothers some of the things you do for arts and crafts?'. It was supposed to be for one day and lasted for 19 weeks - every Monday.

Gigi recalls how fast Anne worked, how difficult it was to catch up with her and Roz Treacher, a fellow teacher aide, recalls that Anne carried so much in her head:

Anne was a law unto herself with her own ideas and enthusiasm ... She had so many

ideas going on in her head that were almost impossible to be in touch with because they all belonged in there and she was going somewhere herself.

There was a lack of continuity in the centre that worried some people:

... with Anne everything was in a folder under her arm and you never saw any of those things. We could look through Gigi's diary and find out where she'd gone and what was happening.

The centre revolved around one person whose enthusiasm and leadership animated the whole programme. But the transfer of responsibility to Gigi was inadequately done and fractious. Although many attempts were made by Anne to give Gigi a clear idea of the work involved there was lacking a basic understanding between the two that made the transfer difficult.

Because of Anne's enthusiasm, the bustling activity at the centre, and the pioneering nature of the role, she was rarely challenged and the official committees were exercising very little direction or monitoring. Much of the ad hoc operation was due, as Anne states, to the extreme difficulty of getting anything going in the first year of a new operation: all straws are grasped at to get people involved.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

The school's Disadvantaged Programme Proposal Committee for a School-Community Co-ordinator had one parent on it - Anne Whyte. She, Phillip Clerici, and Bernie Parsons were predominantly responsible for writing the

submission and there was no doubt on the part of either the Proposal Committee or the centre's Steering Committee that Anne was right for the job. In all events, the school council, who had little or no contact with the centre or the needs of those who used it, was responsible for selecting the co-ordinator. A decision was made not to select Anne despite strong submissions from the principal and vice-principal. Instead Gigi was appointed because of her skill with languages - she spoke four - despite the fact she was not a local resident, a point considered important in the proposal. As one teacher commented:

The council had decided Anne was not going to get the job and that was that: they had a set against her.

The school council's decision had a lot of unfortunate consequences for the project.

In the job specification the Proposal Committee stated that:

... the person filling the position must be able to create the job and train in relevant fields as the need develops.

The acknowledged need for initiative and originality was only one facet of the co-ordinator's role, and the Steering Committee failed to set guidelines, develop structures and, in general, to exercise an overview.

The interview for the position made Gigi aware that the school council was after a person 'who could speak languages'. They had little concept of the work that was to be done:

I had no idea what I was supposed to do.
I felt I had carte blanche.

To some extent the lack of guidelines relate both to teachers' lack of experience in formulating a role and their hesitancy in areas generally considered beyond their professional boundaries. Both the principal and the vice-principal were conscious of the lack of direction but felt "unwilling to dictate direction" or "prepared to give her a hell of a lot of rope". With Anne continuing to work at the centre it became impossible for Gigi to create her own distinct role. She had no previous experience; she found it difficult to disregard the way that Anne was working and yet:

So much of what had gone on the year before was in Anne's head it was really an impossible task to give Gigi a job profile ... in meetings she'd almost thump the table and say, 'Just tell me what I should do and I will do it'. She wanted to know what was expected of her .. whereas it was a new situation and I don't think anyone really knew.

Certainly Gigi didn't. Left to her own resources she admits to having no idea of the aim of the place. She did not even know whether her role was to co-ordinate or actually to do the work. She certainly did not understand in the early days that her role was to listen and meet needs rather than initiate.

The lack of guidelines was exacerbated by the lack of structures. Gigi remained to the end responsible to nobody in a professional way although she made regular, rather expansive formal reports to the school council whose relationship to the project was tenuous. Again,

the lack of prior experience led to timidity. Phillip Clerici had read widely that community centre programmes should not be imposed and admits that

... perhaps we went too far in not making some structure ...

and Bernie Parsons admits in retrospect that

... balanced influences have got to be put into the organisation so that everybody has a say and communication is good and understanding grows. ... There ought to be more direct teacher involvement in the governance and the decisions ...

In the event Gigi created for herself a role in a territory where her influence was unchallenged: with the ethnic parents. Many were unable to communicate; therefore they felt outsiders and unwanted. The inability to communicate with the teacher about the child created a gap that Gigi filled:

I was the trio between them, the teacher and myself, which is something they've never had before in the school.

Gigi tried to break their loneliness by encouraging them to attend the centre and to speak to Australian born parents and perhaps attend migrant English classes. After six months she had created her own structure and was, in Roz's words, "gobbled up by the ethnic community". Her personal aims were always to incorporate all the parents in learning to work and grow together. But the lack of guidelines and structures left its mark. After a year in the job Gigi could still admit to feeling very, very confused and when asked what were the school's aims that were

being met in the centre, she had to admit that she had "never stopped to think about it. I don't know".

The school council decision to appoint Gigi, a decision in which personalities may have obscured objectivity to some extent, had the impact of stymieing the development of the centre and then of refocussing it. As a new person who did not live in the area Gigi was unknown to parents, community, children, and teachers. She had to find out a lot about the staff, about the area itself. The marked personality clash between Gigi and Anne blunted their effectiveness and led to frustration. When Anne left in the middle of the year her personal following was so considerable that it created divisions within the centre and within the school. This reflected immediately on Gigi:

Anne's following was a big one and they liked her. She went and so they went with her.

Gigi's rapport and affinity with the ethnic community, a direct reflection of her linguistic skills and years in the Middle East, predisposed some parents to criticise her for ignoring the Australian parents. Gigi admits that it was a problem:

Many of the Greeks thought I would make them favours that I wouldn't make the others. I straightaway said, 'I am neutral'.

Quite naturally with a change in co-ordinator and emphasis there occurred a change in programme.

PROGRAMMES

* The First Year

It has always been the policy of the infant school under the leadership of Bernie Parsons to maintain close relationships with the parents of the youngest children. From this group in particular, with the active support of the principal and some other teachers, had grown the initial programme for community involvement backed by the Schools Commission Supplementary Grants Program. The aims of bringing more parents into the school to remove barriers, to use community resources, and to strengthen family and school bonds were essentially orientated to supporting the child and improving his school performance. There was an after school programme, extensive communication with parents and social involvement of parents in the school. It was the difficulty of space in the school for these activities which led to the submission for a community centre.

The centre's early emphasis upon home visiting by teacher aides to invite parents into the new centre at the school for their use not only discovered a host of lonely parents but ones with very pressing material and personal needs. These the centre tried to meet as a resource agency, channelling parents off to sources of help provided by local and state welfare agencies. Simultaneously the centre, in close contact with the Education Department's community education programme, set up a series of craft, migrant English, human relations, discussion, and other groups centred upon needs expressed by the increasing number of parents using the centre. It thus became a centre for home visiting, community education, and welfare.

Much of this work was successful. The centre was nearly always occupied, bustling, even perhaps, too frantically active. The home visiting made a major impact: it alerted parents to the school's openness and it developed the potential for much closer contact with the teachers. Parents were found who helped

children to read both in the centre and in classrooms and others gave more general assistance. Consequently, Roz says, "they felt more valued by the teaching staff". In addition, there was a resources directory that was used by both teachers and parents. The centre programmes had broken the ice for many mothers and the centre became important socially as they testify:

I'd rather come over here and bring my knitting - you've got someone to talk to.

It gets you out of the flat: I was talking to my animals.

The centre helped me a lot. I'm on my own and I've sat in that flat two and a half years just waiting for the kids to come back home. When the centre opened I got more involved here and I was doing the Saturday morning basketball.

As a result there were changes that surprised the centre's staff:

I was enormously surprised at the influence that an increase in a mother's self-confidence can have with her own children.

* The Second Year

Very little of this touched migrant families until Gigi's appointment. As she said:

Once they (migrants) knew there was somebody who could understand them the ball started rolling: 'Why don't you go to the school? There is somebody who can understand you!'

and in the same way that the home visiting had

elucidated needs in Australian parents, the presence of a fluent linguist at the centre uncovered parent needs that Gigi found herself increasingly attempting to meet:

I found myself bogged down with the social problems of people - people without money; a woman who was sick at home; child upset; go home - a woman literally rolling with pain; ring up hospital social worker, organise an interpreter, relate to patient what is wrong with her.

The centre became for many a crisis centre, known, trusted, and approachable, especially for the migrants. A mother testified to Gigi's work with another Greek mother:

Her husband was coming up annoying the children - they had to get the police up. Gigi organised her to get a Commission flat - we organised the furniture. Gigi told us what was going on. After school the kids'd come to the centre and we'd watch them. At four o'clock Gigi would watch them while the mother came from work. If the mother had to go to the solicitors or welfare or anything like that she knew she had until five o'clock.

At the same time the programmes commenced the previous year were re-vamped and extended: weaving, sewing, cooking, discussion, art and craft, gym, tennis, coffee afternoons were all organised with varying degrees of success. For a lot of parents, especially lonely mothers, the centre became a drop-in place. It had a pleasant atmosphere, was informal and there was nearly always something going on. Many parents were attracted because few demands were made upon them.

Much of the centre activities was highly successful. Although home visiting was dropped, parents with needs were visited and helped. Two trainee social workers gave extensive help to parents:

I knew I could come here and talk to those two girls whereas I couldn't go to my daughter's teacher and say, 'I'm having a problem at home'.

Parents continued to help children in the centre and the classroom and Gigi was also able to create links between the migrant teachers and some of the parents through the centre.

* Change

Over two or so years a constant change in emphasis was taking place from home visiting to community education programmes, to welfare advice and support, to migrant support. Slowly the focus was slipping away from the school and the children to the parents; towards welfare support for families. Less seemed to be coming back into the school:

The year before the whole programme seemed to be based upon the needs of the children where we could help them by bridging the gap between the parents and the school. Home visiting got us talking to their mothers, finding out all sorts of things and therefore understanding the children more. We involved the mums that wanted to be involved - even increased the mums' confidence in their own ability to help the children. The parents began to feel there was a place for them where they could (a) help their children, and

(b) the teachers. The involvement at the centre seemed to be loosening them up.

In the changeover to a more parent and welfare orientated focus, the centre lost much of what teacher support had existed. The staff generally considered that Schools Commission money should provide something more directly beneficial to the children than they had seen from the community centre. Phillip Clerici saw

... the centre develop as a social welfare institution for people in this district and outside this district and that was not the role envisaged for the staff of a community centre.

As a consequence many programmes had no staff support or even knowledge. The teachers saw nothing meaningful about the centre as far as their prime role of educators was concerned: the co-ordinator saw the centre as a separate entity from the school itself and no individual or group monitored the changes in a way that should have prevented the divergence. The confusion was compounded because what was happening at the centre actually met the tasks for the centre co-ordinator laid down in the school's own submission. The divergence is reflected in the diverse perceptions of the aims for the centre and the co-ordinator held by people associated with the school.

AIMS

The aims developed by two separate proposal committees for (i) the community involvement programme, and (ii) the community co-ordinator had different, although complementary, foci. What was notably lacking was the mechanism for tying the co-ordinator's role and the

centre's usage back to support for the students that was tangible to the teachers. It was that perception of support that had stimulated the community involvement programme. An appropriate mechanism could have been the steering committee implementing and overseeing guidelines developed with the co-ordinator.

The aim of the centre and the task for the co-ordinator have been variously interpreted. The original purpose of home visiting to acquaint parents of the centre and their welcome to the school has been largely satisfied for Australian parents. The loneliness of some parents is being met by the sociability of the centre. Not all agree on the value of this. One teacher commented:

The centre just filled in the day - the social aspect was important. I don't see this as related to kids.

Programmes were next developed at the centre for parents. The interpretation of the aims and focus of the programmes is diverse. One aide considers they are intended

to give the mothers enough competence to find a job or do something else with their time so that they wouldn't stay at home. If people had the initiative they would be out working - they need the work from the financial point of view. Any of the women using the centre would take a job if offered.

Not all would agree.

The welfare support emphasis of both Anne and Gigi in meeting what were often pressing needs of parents is seen by many as being the main aim of the centre.

Greater than the detailed aims and suffused into every activity is an over-riding sense of community development, rarely specifically expressed as such but evidenced by the attitudes of nearly everybody actively involved with the centre. Thus a member of the school council, Anne Harrison, would like a greater understanding between all people:

... perhaps we could have a little form of motto of 'community friendship' so that people can come in and smile and say hello.

More pragmatically a mother believes

... you could see us getting closer with them (migrants). Like before we'd sit one end of the centre - they'd sit the other. The migrants want to join in here and they need Gigi to help them.

But this aim certainly does not appeal to Molly Pill, a teacher:

I don't believe we can integrate people like that - they do not want to be. These things come about after years, we can't push them.

Yet the enthusiasm of the ethnic and Australian mothers for the joint programmes belie the comment.

It was natural that the home visitors, finding considerable loneliness in some of the homes should attempt to provide something for people at the centre although this did not necessarily link them into the school. The aim of the programmes was to develop social interaction but there is also a danger of

making an aim out of a misassumption: that because parents are not coming to school or working, they are not socially occupied. Many are, on their own initiative.

The idea of using the school as a centre for the community becomes extraordinarily complex when little cohesion existed previously and many barriers, especially linguistic, arise to communication. In these circumstances in a large school the resources have to be carefully harnessed to meet carefully and jointly determined objectives.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEMS

* The Teachers, the Centre, and the Co-ordinator

The decision to place the co-ordinator as lowest priority on the supplementary grants list was the teachers'. This was because the programmes at the centre had swung away from a child benefit orientation:

The teachers felt she was out there running her community centre and they were over there teaching the children. The year before there didn't seem to be that tremendous distinction. The community centre seemed to be that resource place where the teachers could call for volunteers and the mums enjoyed it. The mums were getting their own rewards and meeting their needs and teachers were having their needs met by involving parents in classrooms and things.

In any school with a large staff there is an extremely wide range of teacher role interpretations. Hawksburn is no exception:

You'd be sitting in the staff room and the centre came up. There were always two really black and white interpretations - some were for it, others were totally against it.

One teacher who is against it considered it

completely irrelevant. A lot of staff would just ask, 'Please God, let us go into our room and do something for which we are paid and trained'. We get little enough time in the classroom with the children.

But another teacher, very strongly in favour of the centre, disagreed:

Those who oppose it say we are here to teach - fair enough. I go along with that; we are all here to teach. But they are not thinking of the area we are in, of the situation a lot of the parents are in. They are looking at teaching as doing your own thing on your own.

A lot of problems that arise in the classroom could have a lot to do with parents and if you have got parent involvement I should become involved because they can help me and I can help them. I can meet them informally rather than having to railroad them - develop a rapport with them.

It became increasingly difficult for those who supported the centre to justify it as it moved away from the school. Although there were the trenchant critics, most teachers' posture became indifference

because there was so little contact. Gigi was used to help explain methods to migrant parents; she could be called in during a dispute or help with the translation of school newsletters into the parents' language; find out why a child was absent from school and explain parents' problems to teachers in a way that not been done before. But the general opinion of the teachers is that it is beyond the school's role to help parents settle problems which did not appear to be connected directly to the child. They criticised Gigi's work:

Help to parents, reading medicine bottle labels, visits to the bank to interpret were helpful to parents and building up their bond individually with the school but we weren't an agency like that: there were other people who did that sort of thing.

There was increasing concern that the centre was developing as a social welfare support centre and teachers were also not made aware of the valuable services that parents were fulfilling in the office, the library, and the classrooms.

The emphasis upon the community use of the centre always made the teachers feel somewhat outsiders. The value of the centre to the child was perceived indirectly in terms of creating a happy parent and Gigi resisted both child and teacher use of the centre:

The centre is not for the child: the centre is for the parents. If the teacher comes in because there is an empty space the parent will be pushed away. I think this is a mistake.

The intangibility to the teachers of the indirect and

unverifiable connections between the centre, the co-ordinator, and the children are part of a very much larger problem. As Bernie Parsons admits:

We haven't persuaded teachers very well that the home language will be of value in explaining concepts, helping them with their English work, maths or whatever, let alone show parents how it could be done. We haven't worked out what it is realistic to ask parents to do who have very little English. We have to find out more clearly how the education process can be improved and show parents what their part is in a way that they can understand, show teachers what the parents' part is so they can feel they are working as a team.

There are a lot of things the teachers could do for the parents that neither the parents nor the teachers realise. Take the Turks - Moslems. We have not tried to relate their religious culture to our modern teaching methods. Now I've read the Koran and used extracts to illustrate some of the points that we're involved in in our school. It was a winner - I got it translated into Turkish. It had basic references with which they are familiar and I was able to link our aims and objectives to their aims and let them see the method by which we were trying to achieve these aims.

* The Role and Status of the Co-ordinator and Teacher Aides

The co-ordinator's role was developed by Anne, adapted

by Gigi, but never clearly determined. It was a role being developed by two dissimilar people with few or no guidelines, with few or no precedents, with few people they could share their ideas with. As for Anne, so for Gigi: the whole field was new. Anne enveloped everybody with her enthusiasm, Gigi cajoled: both successfully.

Status is important. Anne's enthusiasm, ability, and mastery of words - "She doesn't talk in monosyllables" - put teachers on the defensive. One mother recalled:

... there was a lot of backbiting in the staffroom the way Anne Whyte would put the teachers on the spot.

A teacher agreed that Anne

... had great charm, a great capacity for putting words around things and ... you were talked into things ...

but no real change of attitude took place. Several people thought that being a teacher aide and presumably of lower status led to teacher opposition:

If she'd had 'teacher' written on her front, she'd have had a lot less trouble.

It wouldn't have changed the situation. Teachers, like most people, are resentful of change.

The decision in early 1978 to have a teacher co-ordinate the project on a part-time basis was welcomed by teachers and aides. Roz Treacher believes:

Teachers will feel it is more school-based

if it has got a teacher who is working
for the benefit of the school primarily.

If Anne overwhelmed teachers, Gigi did not touch them:
both ways created problems.

If the demands on the co-ordinator were great the
same is true of teacher aides who helped in the centre.
This was particularly true of home visiting. The
original focus of home visiting had been on families
whose children had problems at school but that had
been too emotionally draining and depressing for aides
from very different backgrounds with no skills or
experience except for their common humanity. Con-
sequently, visits were made to a cross-section of the
Australian families yet even here the aides often
found themselves out of their depth. Rosemary, short
on confidence, admits she "volunteered" for home
visiting but found herself constantly

... getting into situations I couldn't
handle - social work which were not at
all school problems

which, in turn, made her feel insecure. It was
'culture shock'. She, like Roz, strongly felt the
need for structure, a routine of work which when it
was not forthcoming led to further insecurity. As
a result, "I'm happy to be away from it".

In the previous year the aides had already suffered
embarrassment at not being able to communicate with
the migrant mothers:

Most of the people who walk through that
door either have difficulties or can't
communicate with me. I find it awkward
knowing that so many things that happen
I am not going to be able to cope with.

As the focus of the centre swung onto the migrants and
their welfare needs it became increasingly difficult
for the aides, working part-time, to keep up with what
was going on and so they finally, thankfully, dropped
out.

* Necessity for a Co-ordinator

Both Phillip and Bernie have begun to query the need
for a full-time co-ordinator for the centre. Bernie
believes that having a co-ordinator could restrict
others from using their initiative. Phillip believes
that the position rather than linking parents and
teachers can operate to keep them apart. To a large
extent those teachers who had developed a relationship
with parents, sometimes through the centre, now by-
pass it and get the mothers to help on their own
initiative. In fact, the early ideas for the co-
ordinator position had assumed that it would eventually
cease to exist as the programme developed a capacity in
those involved, teachers and parents, to run the
programmes themselves. That this did not happen,
except on a very small scale, can be attributed to

- (i) a lack of conscious effort to make it
happen perhaps related to lack of co-
ordination skills;
- (ii) a change in policy and personnel halfway
through a very short programme, focussing
on migrants, more likely to remain dependent
for a longer period of time;
- (iii) a failure to appreciate that expanded com-
petence may not necessarily be realised at
the school.

Consequently, some of the programmes that ran

successfully during the previous year died over the Christmas holidays. Few were re-started unless the co-ordinator took personal responsibility for them.

* Division among Parents

From the very beginning of the centre a division existed between those whose main association with the school had been through the semi-formal Parents and Friends Association (PFA) and those enticed in by the very lack of formality as a result of home visits. The latter frequently using the centre, resent its use by the PFA, a small group who could perhaps have been disbanded at the outset. The situation where, at the school fete, people were bringing things along to be sold for the benefit of the PFA or of the community centre was difficult enough but the school council decision to employ Gigi added its own complications.

Anne's very ability to attract people and their dependence on her created a further split when she went:

Anne's following is a big one: she went so they went with her. A lot of enthusiasm went with her.

Gigi's focus on the migrant needs at a time when Anne was still working, for obvious reasons, with the Australian parents in itself created friction. Gigi was accepted by the increasing numbers of migrants attracted by her skills which was in turn resented by some of the Australian group of mothers.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that snippets of information filtering back to the staffroom could lead to hostile comments from some teachers:

That type of building attracts the wrong type of person - mothers who just want to go there and gossip, waste their time and be abusive about the principal and teachers. I can see it can be a great source of trouble without somebody to control it.

Whatever the truth of the argument, the mud stuck and with so little teacher contact became difficult to remove.

* The Timescale and Change

In two years a centre had been located in the school grounds, two different people had been responsible for co-ordinating it and a strong change of emphasis took place in the second year. But the objectives of the school-community programme and of the centre are to deal with attitudinal changes that are essentially long term. Talking of migrants who came to the centre in the second year, Roz talks of spending

... almost a year getting these people's confidence or getting to know them and helping them to feel that the school is a place where they can come and receive help ...

and in that time very little comes back to the school. This is not surprising when the teachers hold out little or no expectation of academic support from migrant families and cannot communicate with them over the child's social growth.

The changes taking place with and between parents in the centre were complex and, for the migrants in particular, slow. Gigi, much wiser, is at pains to emphasise:

Don't be in a haste to change. People have to feel things in their own good time. People will object to change. They have objected and left, and it took me a hell of a long time to repair it. People were not sure of me. I had to prove I was with them and for them and when they realised they started to come back ... it took me almost a year to do that. That is why I would like a continuity.

Answering the needs of people who are not compelled to attend and allowing them to operate at their own pace is a different emphasis from the more highly planned and structured school programmes with clear objectives. Many mothers are available only for short and varying periods of time and often will not be tied to a regular programme or a long one. They have to respond to domestic, work, and other social demands. The centre has to account for this. The teachers' approach is different to the centre's and as few teachers fully understood that as understood the aims of the centre itself.

* Is a Centre necessary?

Many schools have programmes similar to those at Hawksburn and do not have a centre: direct contact is made with parents for help and normal school facilities used. Is the centre necessary? To Phillip Clerici, inheriting a large school with minimal parent contact, the centre has been the catalyst for many of the connections between school and home that are now taken for granted:

People just didn't come as they do in other areas - they were reluctant. Most grade teachers who contact parents now

for reading or excursions would get a positive response: we got no response at all before. Parents do come through the efforts of teachers and it makes it harder for new staff to understand that they didn't come before.

THE FUTURE - A CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT TO LEARN FROM THE PAST

The aim is for the centre to be closely related in future to the educational programme in the school whilst providing programmes for parent and community members:

We do want the children to use the centre as a resource on a regular basis and not just for reading. At the same time the parents will be using it too and on many occasions they will both be using it together.

The responsibility for this is vested in a senior teacher with a deep interest in and concern for parent involvement in the school. It is Gary O'Mahoney's aim that much of the responsibility for the centre's programmes will be consciously divested from the school to the concerned parents:

The parents, teachers, and children will give the service that one person provided before.

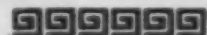
To some extent this will hasten progress towards self-sufficiency that some teachers always saw as inevitable.

Gary has developed a three-fold programme of parent involvement, community education, and community

development. He is working with the steering committee and the new PFA president; he is emphasising the need for processes and structures which link the school to the centre. The reorganised steering committee maintain a constant overview of the planning and implementation that has gone on. Meetings have been held and wide-spread discussion has taken place to determine parent needs. Conscious attempts are being made to spread the responsibility wider for the day-to-day management of the centre.

The thrust of the programmes is a compromise between the old and the new. A diverse range of educational programmes based on curriculum offerings and electives and others with a service orientation have been put on in the centre. With this is an attempt to involve and support the teachers more deeply. There has been an attempt to increase the school's viability through inviting parents in to see what their children are learning and they are invited to help. New interest programmes have been developed for those parents who may not have felt extended or attracted by previous programmes. Finally, a range of successful past programmes have been revived or modified. These include welfare referral, the attachment of a Prahran city social welfare officer on some days, a revived home visiting programme using a bilingual teacher aide, and sporting and social 'drop-in' events. The attempt has been made to attract different segments of the school community with the understanding of the need to drop programmes which may not succeed. Newsletters, handbooks in two languages, 'What's on' sheets, and display boards have been used in an attempt to attract attention.

Gary claims that the new people, different perspectives, and the determination to build the programmes back into the school are slowly bringing a new dimension and breadth of life into the centre.



This is a follow-up to the case study on Hawksburn in "Home-School Liaison, Some Case Studies from the School and Community Project" published in November 1977.

SELF HELP AT INALA, QLD.

the aboriginal counsellor role

BY: *David Pettit*

The Setting

Inala is a Housing Commission satellite suburb on the outer south-western fringes of Brisbane. It is an area of brick and stucco homes, of tiled and fibro roofs that is geographically isolated from most of Brisbane by poor communications and is socially distinctive. The mixed population of Aborigines, Australians, and migrants is mostly struggling on low incomes. There are two high schools both double storey, airy buildings, open underneath to minimise the damp heat of the Queensland summer. The core of Inala is the shopping centre which uncompromisingly caps an exposed, asphalted hilltop. Close by is the house which is the Inala Family Education Centre (IFEC). It forms a convenient drop-in centre for students and adults, has a careers centre, and provides a venue for hobbies, skills, and study classes. The centre is run by a guidance officer of the Queensland Education Department's Guidance and Special Education Branch and attached to it are a secondary teacher, other teachers who work on a sessional basis to provide adult literacy and recreational classes, and two Aboriginal study counsellors. The counsellors

work with the Aboriginal and Islander students who make up about 6 percent of the students at Inala High School and 2 percent at Richlands High School. Most of the students are not full blood Aborigine or Islander.

AIMS AND FOCUS

The counselling and guidance project at Inala was developed as a pilot project by the Queensland Department of Education with the co-operation of the Australian Government Department of Aboriginal Affairs in an attempt to improve the quality of secondary education experienced by Aboriginal and Islander children. Teachers experienced with Aboriginal children had commented on their low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness in being able to influence their future; they are also characterised by limited awareness of job opportunities and how to obtain them. The project focusses upon education and career guidance and on the associated need for counselling Aboriginal students with social and personal problems. Its main aim is to keep Aboriginal students at school, to emphasise to them the

importance of education, to support them directly and indirectly through their parents, and to build up their sense of personal worth. The importance of the parents in support for the students at school was recognised from the beginning of the project as was the need to increase parental understanding of the structure of education and how the school's operation affected their children.

Ross Clarke and Lesley McIntyre, the guidance officers responsible for the project, became quickly and increasingly aware that parent counselling was potentially as effective as student counselling. When funding became available parents actively participated in the decision-making process that resulted in the IFEC house being bought to increase the guidance officers' and counsellors' accessibility to parents and as a base for support programmes for parents.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

The decision to focus attention upon student support both at home and school immediately faced the project leaders with the problems of accessibility to and legitimacy with Aboriginal parents. Hence the decision to appoint two Aborigines as counsellors: As Ross comments:

Initially we appointed Trish Daanen as a means of establishing us with the black community. Even with her it took a long time.

The work that Trish Daanen and Lenise Schloss, the two Aboriginal counsellors, do is essentially one of communication and interpreting 'school' to the

Aboriginal parent and vice versa. As Lenise says:

... it's knowing how to interpret what is going on in a white world to the black - from black to white and speak about it objectively and be very careful not to give your own point of view.

It requires strong personal qualities not to make decisions for people. Trish claims that she is

... ready to listen and show people. I'm not there to preach but I help them in my little way to decide for themselves.

The two counsellors work very informally with parents. They are very different people and to a large extent complement one another. Trish was originally from a mission and moved to Inala with her husband five years ago whereas Lenise has lived in Inala much of her life and, as Ross claims, "she seems to be related to half the Aborigines in Queensland". She also went to Inala High School herself and was an outstanding student.

To a large extent the school's internal structure and the nature of social relationships between staff dominate the framework within which the counsellors have to work. They are formally attached to the guidance officer in each of the high schools. This is their entrée into the school but their relationship with the guidance officers and staff depends completely upon the quality of their work and their perceived effectiveness in the eyes of the teachers. Counsellors are invited to staff meetings, have open access to the school and receive pupil lists. Even within the school the relationships are informal, the counsellors contacting both students and teachers direct but keeping the principal and the guidance officer informed. One

of the crucial skills that the counsellors have learnt is knowing the limits to their roles:

I ask support from the guidance officer because there are many things I am not trained in ...

The counsellors have to be extremely sensitive to the operational norms of the school, contacting students only in breaks or lunchtime unless the teachers are previously informed and constantly reporting back to them. Most of the counsellors' work involves talking to students referred by the guidance officers or teachers, making a visit to the home, and reporting back to the initiator. Occasionally, the counsellors will help a parent make direct contact with the school.

It is necessary to help parents make their first contact with the school as very rarely have they sufficient confidence to go up on their own. Consequently, the major commitment of the counsellors is to informal home visits to the Aboriginal and Islander parents. The information they dispense is to some extent self-seeding through the networks that exist in the Aboriginal community. As Lenise claims:

... word got around with other families and it was really good because they sort of educated some of their own relatives as to what we were on about.

The network of contacts that the counsellors have extends into the welfare fields:

If you can't handle a problem you can get

on a phone and ring someone and know they will be there to help you.

The problems facing the counsellors indicate why informality is so necessary:

It is very informal - you cannot go in with a lot of theories and strategies because you might open a door and the woman is in tears and has a black eye or something. You have to be able to perceive what is going on in the family and adapt to each situation as it comes up.

They also work closely with John Hansen, the Commonwealth Education Officer, who is responsible for administering the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme. As with teachers, they provide him with information about the students' attendance and progress and their home environment, and work closely with the education officer in attempting to solve attendance problems. In a number of cases, because the counsellors have been on the spot and able to see the families on a day-to-day basis and because of their own skill and abilities, they have been successful in encouraging children to stay at school where, in other circumstances, the children may very well have been expelled or have left school of their own accord.

PROGRAMMES

* Liaison between school and home

This is the major focus of the counsellors' work. Their work starts at school, getting to know students,

gaining their trust, forming a sort of friendship and then, once a rapport has been established, speaking to them about their schooling. A very important part of the early work is finding out about the family environment:

... how much schooling the parents had so that when you go to the home ... you know how to approach the parents because you know the type of background they come from.

Secondary education is for the Aboriginal parents "a whole new ball game - they don't really understand what high school is ...", and as a consequence the counsellors spend time explaining the teacher's assessment sheets and the school's report system, explaining the code that is a record of school performance and generally emphasising the need and desirability of the child's doing well at school. To do this the counsellors explain the high school's organisation, the courses they will follow, the different subjects and preparation for a school day. In general, the parents are unable to offer support because they are not aware of the nature of support that is appropriate until the counsellors point it out:

One family realised they couldn't help their child - there was no resource book, not even a magazine in that home - nothing. They requested me to help both of them to help their child. So I spent a weekend while the father was at home. I went to the shops with them on Saturday morning and bought exercise books ... writing down the assignment, date due and name, etc. That's a basic thing which this child had not picked up by Grade 8. It is really basic support skills that most

parents need. Some of them may know them but they are unaware and it is an awareness - it's changing attitudes too.

The counsellors place a great emphasis upon the creation of good study conditions at home for the child, getting the parents to show interest and offering support. Thus a lot of work is explaining how quiet, space, and good lighting are necessary if a child is to study, information casually but deliberately seeded. It is a very sensitive area for parents and, as Trish commented:

You have to speak to them at their level or you lose them - and they don't come back.

Most of the liaison work is basic parent education about the school with the aim of involving the parents by helping them to a reasonable understanding. The second step is getting them to the school whether it be for personal appointments or by arranging transport for the parent-teacher night. In many cases, the gulf between the parents' experience and the school is so large that the counsellors do not feel that the parents are ready to benefit from a visit. Much of the counsellors' difficulties arise because

... the majority of families feel that they are only summoned to school to hear something bad ...

As a result,

... just to make that step to the school ... for an Aboriginal parent to let the teachers know they are concerned about their child - that is the difficult step.

The parent education role is both time-consuming and monotonous.

I have got to repeat things over and over again because the parents don't understand ...

and therefore change takes place only slowly.

Support for their work comes from the teacher at the IFEC who operates with the parent and the child in the home to demonstrate the manner in which they can help their children. For further support to parents the STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) programme is run regularly at the IFEC house and the counsellors do a lot to encourage parents to attend.

The information that the counsellors bring back to the school is extremely helpful. Neville Clinton, principal of Richlands High, has found that

Trish provides contact and information can travel backwards and forwards. She is realistic and perceptive,

and this increases the teachers' effectiveness with Aboriginal students. Trevor Jones, the guidance officer at Inala High School believes that

they have, by their actions, removed a lot of tension from the school.

For the new teachers coming into the schools, the counsellors provide information about the local area, the way of life of students, and their attitudes. Because of their experience they can often provide alternatives:

There was one teacher who was not able to communicate with students at all. When I first spoke to him I thought, 'Oh boy - I can't stand you; how could kids stand you?' I gave him some background on Inala and said, 'You are having adapting problems', and pointed out how important it is for local people to see teachers as human beings with feelings and emotions. This eventually came over and began to work for him ...

* The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme

This scheme provides financial support for Aboriginal and Islander children and their families for books and for tutoring services. Inevitably the counsellors are closely associated with the programme since their aims and those of the grant are similar. They work closely with John Hansen to remind the parents of the need for students to attend school regularly. As John says:

Attendance is the indicator: if they're not at school they cannot learn.

Of far more prominence and value than the 'policeman' role is the advice they are able to give John as a result of their frequent contact with students, parents, and teachers. This is particularly true when there are difficult home circumstances and when students may need tutorial assistance, perhaps a change of school or even boarding.

The counsellors are very wary at becoming 'policemen' for the grant at the expense of their relationship with students and their families and yet the grant provides a potential conflict issue all the time. Teachers can be very hostile if Aboriginal students appear without books or uniforms when they know money is provided

to the parents. One teacher confronted an Aboriginal boy with the assertion that he was paying for the student's grant with his taxes, "o where is your uniform?".

Fellow students likewise are critical of the pocket money provisions and occasionally the attitude of the 'poor whites' with large families or on the dole can be equally antagonistic. The grant raises these potential conflict points which the counsellors have worked hard to defuse. While Trish believes the grant "causes a lot of hassles at times" she sees it as better than her childhood experience of induced dependency:

On the mission the government used to send the books in bulk, in the truck with the insignia on the side. I had the opportunity to go shopping but the government never trusted us with money, you could say. The grant is better in that way - that the family have got the responsibility.

* Programmes in and out of school

One of the strategies of the project is an attempt to foster Aboriginal pride and self-esteem and general student understanding through special elective programmes. Thus Lenise has taken a short Grade 12 and a much longer Grade 10 programme as a part of 'citizenship education' at the school in the curriculum that deals with minority groups in Australia.

Another strategy is for the counsellors and staff of IFEC to be closely involved with the transition from school to work. The IFEC house provides a career reference library and linked sound-vision programmes

of potential careers based upon experiences of Aborigines in the workforce. Before they leave school for work the students are prepared for interviews, given help with applying for jobs, courses and further education.

In 1977 a very successful and enjoyable sewing class was held at Inala High School for Aboriginal mothers and daughters with the help of IFEC. As a spin-off, mothers informally discussed how to cope with family upheavals through sharing their problems and solutions. In addition, a series of parent education evenings are held regularly at the initiative of the IFEC committee. They deal with health, nutrition, sex, budgeting, Aboriginal issues, and employment. At the end of the year the counsellors are involved in a transition programme of five or six sessions at IFEC for parents of children entering high school. This programme includes adolescent psychology, the organisation of the high school, and study. The counsellors also publicise the courses available to adults and the unemployed through the Aboriginal Study Grants.

The centre itself provides a convenient place for counsellors to consult informally with welfare agency workers and is an advice centre for local people. It has become a professional training centre for teachers in training, guidance officers, interstate visitors concerned with Aboriginal education, and agency workers.

* Education and welfare

Because the counsellors obtain intimate knowledge of the families with whom they are in contact and often develop a close personal relationship, they have found it impossible to disassociate the educational and

welfare elements of their support work. Lenise finds that

... many families I go into have welfare or social problems that are always brought up as a topic of conversation anyway.

Ross has found that

you get sucked in - it's because of the personal relationships you have to develop.

Trish sees herself as acting on behalf of the child through the parents. She believes:

You can't expect to educate kids when they've got all those hassles at home ... that's where the welfare comes in. It's like a road - you smooth it out so there is no stopping that kid.

Consequently the counsellors find themselves involved in a whole host of welfare problems, the successful solution of which enhances their status with the parents and their children. They become deeply involved in court appearances, arranging legal aid, communicating with children placed in institutions or hostels, unemployment, home help, and the incredible maze of welfare provision.

Lenise claims "... Aboriginal people don't question white authority figures", and as a consequence much of their work is concerned with building up the self-concept of both the parents and children by obtaining services to which they are entitled and by offering personal support. Trish finds that "It is hard to get them to feel they have got rights" and that

a lot of kids use colour to get out of doing something - but I won't listen to that ... I build people up, tell them they can do it.

The basic goal for many families is to move them towards self-reliance but it is very difficult and time consuming to change attitudes, create links and promote the use of services. The attitude of the counsellors is best summarised by Ross:

When you get into educational counselling so often all the emotional problems come up. We interpret those things as problems that have to be remedied. An Aboriginal person might not accept you going round with just the express purpose of solving education problems.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR INITIATING AND CONTINUING THE PROGRAMMES

The initiative for developing the project was taken by the Queensland Guidance and Special Education Branch (GSE). With the appointment of Ross Clark and Lesley McIntyre and, successively, of Trish Daanen and Lenise Schloss, the responsibility for day-to-day running was located at Inala with an inter-departmental committee suggesting guidelines. The four people above, especially Ross, have been predominantly responsible for shaping the nature of the project and, in particular, the nature of services they offer. The Inala Family Education Centre has a parent committee, however, which acts as a sounding board, manages the centre, and was

responsible for appointing the teacher who uses it as a base. The committee is predominantly Aboriginal and meets fortnightly.

To a large extent the counsellors' work is determined by the nature of the needs expressed by the clients and their ability to respond to these needs. It is also dependent upon the manner in which the schools interpret their roles and facilitate the work of the counsellors who are in a classic dependency relationship.

PROBLEMS FACED AND ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

Black consciousness

Both counsellors were employed initially because they are Aborigines. They have found, as Aborigines, that working for and with Aborigines leads to a great deal of introspection and to personal crises of identity. The counsellors' personal experiences of discrimination or of discrimination directed towards their families and children is more critical and traumatic because they see so many other instances in their daily work. Ross believes that

If you have a programme directed at Aborigines it is bound to raise the level of black consciousness.

Both the counsellors have developed a heightened awareness of being black. Lenise is forcibly, even aggressively, black and both evidence a high degree of commitment. As Trish says:

It's more than a job to me: I'm helping

my own people.

Ross sees that this raised consciousness is inevitable and necessary because

kids are going to face discrimination in getting houses and jobs. If they don't see themselves as being Aboriginal there's a problem because the community does and it is going to attach stereotypes to them.

To be too aggressively black could be politically counter-productive but to be too compliant is ineffective. It is a difficult path for the counsellors to tread both with their clients and their professional associates.

Status, training and professional acceptance

The problem above is directly associated with their own acute consciousness of their status and the need for acceptance by a very disparate range of clients. Neville Clinton at Richlands sees

a need for them to exercise effective leadership which requires not only the appropriate knowledge and insight but also confidence that comes from professional acceptance.

Lenise speaks of the uncertainty associated with varieties of acceptance, at one time being really "put in her place" and at another "just made to feel as an equal".

The counsellors' formal training is limited. Lesley and Ross were responsible for some 'on-the-job'

training. Trish has done a teacher aide course and both have done the STEP course. Yet a lot of the counsellors' value is directly related to their local knowledge and acceptability and to skills of communication which can have no formal valuation.

Status and recognition is a matter of time and training. Lenise is due to start teacher training and Trish feels strongly the need

to get that piece of paper to say
'You're qualified'.

They are made most conscious of this need for qualification and acceptance in their dealings with teachers although the two are not necessarily synonymous. There is, with some teachers, an uncertainty:

I feel I am not on an equal footing and I am wondering whether they are being patronising or whether they are genuinely concerned about the particular child.

In one school Lenise overheard a teacher who had been superficially interested in and considerate for her work tell the guidance officer to put all the blacks in the bottom stream from the start because that is where they would finish up in any case. The counsellors have difficulty in getting some teachers to understand the reality of the child's experience:

Coming to Inala for a lot of teachers is a shock because they are middle class, they are secure, they don't know what insecurity is - they don't know what it is like to go home and not have a meal at night. It is very hard for them to adapt because they have

never gone through this sort of situation - you just get a feeling that some teachers just can't comprehend what goes on in a child's life. The kid might be type-cast as a behaviour problem where the child may just be hungry, hasn't had a decent night's sleep for weeks. Relating to a teacher about that can be very difficult but you have just got to be patient.

Similar misunderstandings occur in the use of words or phrases which further alienate the student and need quick, clear rectification. Trish recalls a teacher telling an Islander child:

'Stop acting like a dog in a manger', a saying she'd never heard of. She thought that he'd called her a mongrel dog! I didn't know of that expression.

Perceptions and attitudes

For the guidance officers there is always the problem of white perceptions and interpretations of black problems. Ross admits that

we interpret a host of things as problems to be remedied whether they are or are not. So to some extent we, as professionals, perceive welfare as being needed whether it is or not.

This problem is not always relieved by the Aboriginal counsellors who are already highly socialised into the guidance officers' framework for interpretation and solution of problems. This

difference in perception is typified by the assumptions underlying the Aboriginal Secondary Grants scheme and the counsellors' own *raison d'être* - the need to keep children at school over an extended period of time for an ultimate reward. The principle of delayed gratification and nurture of resources is completely foreign to the life experiences of many Aboriginal and poor white families in Inala. Daily existence, food, clothing, shelter, and care are all short term goals often not achieved and intimately bound up with the rhythm of the meagre fortnightly pension cheque.

The grant also poses dangers for the counsellors of being too closely associated with the non-attendance clauses for which the grant can be terminated. It can easily create barriers between the counsellors and Aboriginal children and parents which could make them appear 'white men's lackeys' doing the dirty work despite the direct responsibility John Hansen takes to solve attendance problems himself. Trish admits she steers right away from the grant scheme because people are on the defensive once 'grant' is mentioned.

Role diversity

There are structural problems associated with the project especially as they affect its priorities and focus. The counsellors are associated with a range of projects and people all of whom have different, although related, priorities. They work with the guidance officers and principals in the schools on whose acceptance they are totally dependent. They work with Ross at IFEC where they are partly based and in some of whose programmes they participate. They work with the Commonwealth Education Officer by providing him with information on students' progress. In addition, they have the responsibility for dealing

with a string of visitors and taking them with them on visits to schools and homes which inevitably detracts from the ease of communication with their clients. There is some compensating pay-off from the visitors whose interest may help the counsellors to clarify their role and build their self-esteem.

It is easy for the actual building - the IFEC house - to be confused with the work the counsellors do. Although it has value in providing neutral territory for meetings and discussions with parents and young adults, both counsellors have their focus in the schools with the teachers and students. Their work is wholly implementable from the school. Lenise believes that

you are more effective in your work if
you are part and parcel of the school -
are more accepted by the staff and the
administration.

Trish agrees but adds that

the centre is good because the people
have a phone number, the place is central
and they are coming.

The value of the centre depends upon the boundaries the counsellors set for their role:

If you just want to be an ordinary
counsellor and not get involved in the
total community you could work quite
conveniently from the school.

But, by having an alternative base at the IFEC, the counsellors find themselves far freer to move

about the community as part of their work with no questions asked, to query teacher actions, refer clients to other agencies without involving the school and deal freely with the police and agencies on matters not directly affecting a high school student but his family or relations.

Other Issues

The final problems relate to the overview of the counsellors' work. They both admit to suspicion that on occasions they are being 'used up' by whites for their own good which, if it occurs, appears almost unavoidable.

They are conscious of working within a very restricted time scale and believe that their work will rarely bear fruit in the short term.

Their work is focused in the high schools and yet, as Lenise says, the students have drifted through seven years of education in which time

the kid is left to his own devices. All of a sudden all of these people are involved because the child is receiving a secondary grant.

All this time the parents have rarely had pointed out to them the important part they play in their child's education. For this reason great hopes are placed on the Aboriginal kindergarten. If parents become involved there it is more likely that their involvement will follow through into the primary school

because they are learning the skill of communicating with the teacher and are

involved in the child's life there.

Finally, the project rests on the desirability of a child remaining at school as long as possible to obtain certification and knowledge to improve access to jobs. The counsellors, parents, and teachers promote this idea of 'doing well' but in the present state of the job market for young people in Australia the premise is in danger of becoming a myth. Do the students see it that way?

Mum was shouting at Georgina: 'If you don't go to school you won't be able to get a job'. And Georgina was coming back - 'Doesn't matter - if you do go to school you still won't get a job'.

FACTORS IN THE SUCCESS OF PROGRAMMES

Much of the success of the project - and inevitably any shortcomings - is related directly to the experience and personal quality of the people involved.

The counsellors have both had experiences similar to the Aboriginal people they serve. Yet, as Trish is quick to point out, it is a mistake to consider Aborigines en masse. Consequently her mission background complements Lenise's local upbringing. Yet they have in common an empathy towards people, a dedication to their advancement and an understanding of the problems Aborigines face. Lenise puts it simply:

I know what it is like to be black.

Because of this common background they are in a

better position to make constructive criticism and have it accepted:

If a white authority figure or professional criticised the student the family would take it as a slight against themselves and the way they had reared their child.

But the counsellors do not automatically have empathy with all Aborigines and many of their clients are Islanders with different backgrounds.

Helen Daniells, guidance officer at Richlands High, believes that as well as their empathy and helpfulness it is their accessibility that increases the trust which people place in them. They are accessible because they both live in Inala but they both feel that this sometimes makes them over-accessible. Trish feels she often has to get out all day on Sunday for a break but admits that to be effective, "you've got to be local and have them respect you". John Hansen also places great value on their being 'on-the-spot' and their attitude:

They don't look on it as a 9 - 4 job:
they're working at weekends and nights.

They are also very slow to draw boundaries to their work: it is particularly important to deal with welfare and educational needs and provision hand-in-hand. Lenise summarises it well:

If I want to gain the confidence, trust and faith of a family, I can't go in and ignore their problem and just concentrate on education because they won't be bothered

listening to me. You are a supporting person right through whatever is going on.

To a large extent their success is related to the philosophy with which Ross and Lesley imbued the project. The same crucial elements of positive self-concept and trust achieved through constant support that the counsellors now use in their approach to clients was the one which Ross and Lesley used throughout their training of the counsellors. There is no discrepancy between philosophy and practice because the rationale has been internalised.

Another success factor has been the very free hand that the Guidance and Special Education Branch has been prepared to give Ross and the management of the IFEC on the understanding that those at the local level have a far better idea of how to implement policy. This is reinforced by the collegiate nature of decision making employed at the centre and between the guidance officers and the counsellors.

Finally, the IFEC pilot project has not been subjected to uncertainty about funding. This has enabled a continuity of staff over the four years and the build-up of strong local networks based on the counsellors and the IFEC.

The future

The Aboriginal counsellor role has been sufficiently effective so far for an expansion to three other centres in Queensland - Townsville, Acacia Ridge, and Woodridge. Serious consideration is being given to a centre with Aboriginal counsellors in Moree,

New South Wales, and in Mackay.

But there are difficulties associated with the expansion. For a start the Queensland Government has put a freeze on the employment of teacher aides and public servants. There is a need for an appropriate formal training program that will facilitate job mobility and enhance job performance. Also required is the development of an appropriate career structure.

Hopefully the Aboriginal counsellor role will evolve as Aboriginal parents and students become more sophisticated in their relation to the school system. In particular, the need to act as a link to other support agencies such as Legal Aid could decrease as the clients become self-sufficient in using these services.

